

VINDICATE ME!

Our sermon for this “Vindicate Me” Sunday in the Lenten season is taken from our inspired Psalm, with our thoughts guided by this translated verse:

*Vindicate me, O Elohim,
and defend my legal case from (a) people (who are) not pious;
from (a) man of deceit and injustice, deliver me.¹*

Grace be unto you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ

The long purple season of repentance is drawing to a close. There are just two weeks yet before the things from which we have all been fasting, the “Alleluias” in particular, will be ours in which to rejoice again. We had a foretaste of that last week. Then we had a bit of a respite from the somber penitential days of Lent. We were shown that we could rejoice in the midst of our repentance.

Today, we are back in the somber days, the purple and scarlet weeks in which our Lord’s suffering, Passion, and death are so vividly recalled. This week, we are being encouraged to call upon that Lord Who suffered and died for us for vindication. Through the Word of God, we are led to pray God to declare us right, even when the pressures of this fallen world, the devil, and most particularly, our own sins weigh upon us. The mood for the week was set centuries ago.

The days of Lent, named for the “lengthening of days,” appear to have been given as a time for fasting for a long time before the season was even named. From ancient writings one of the students – of one of the disciples – of one of the

¹ Psalm 43:1.

Apostles of our Lord – records that a time of fasting before the Paschal Feast, the Easter celebration, had existed for a long time. Our Lenten practice may be dated to the beginning of the annual Resurrection feasts of the very early New Testament Church. Lent was marked early on, in both the Eastern and Western branches of Christianity, with bans on dairy products, and meat. (For that reason, the early centuries of Lent were the times from which pretzels and hot-cross buns stemmed).²

Now that many of us are thinking about snack time, and considering how grateful we may be because we are not forced to fast using church-prescribed lists of forbidden foods for the season, let us turn our minds to the theme of this week – vindication. Consider how you may think and feel when you believe you are suffering some sort of injustice on account of the Faith which we confess. Perhaps you are struggling internally with the ever-increasing restrictions on outward displays of the Christian Faith. Maybe you are aching with the real loss of religious liberties our nation's citizens are experiencing. It is possible that you are righteously angry over the reality that corporations and individuals in a once freer market are now being legally coerced to set aside their owners', founders', or majority values to have to provide or buy coverage for birth-control and abortifacients.³ It could be that you are hurt and

² Kleinmans, Theodore J. The Year of the Lord. The Church Year: Its Customs, Growth, & Ceremonies, St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1967 61ff.

³ The Secretary must ensure that in each Exchange, there is at least one plan available that covers abortions beyond those allowed by Hyde and at least one plan that does not cover abortions beyond those permitted by Hyde. Internet, <http://www.dpc.senate.gov/healthreformbill/healthbill18.pdf>, accessed April 4, 2014.

ashamed that some once-faithful Lutheran congregations are abandoning the treasures of the Faith – the means which clearly communicate Christ-crucified for the forgiveness of anyone’s sins (except the devil and his angels, of course). It may be you are aching over friends or family members who ridicule you on account of your belief in the Word of God as it is revealed in the Bible. In any of those circumstances and so many more, the opening words of today’s Psalm are yours to declare:

*Vindicate me, O Elohim,
and defend my legal case from (a) people (who are) not pious;
from (a) man of deceit and injustice, deliver me.⁴*

Those words are not going to sell well in a society like ours. We are surrounded by media heroes who are “Justified,” in themselves, who strive through might and power to clear themselves of blame or suspicion because they are “Divergent.” Many are “Shameless,” in holding to “10 Rules for Sleeping Around,” as they strive to create for themselves a new moral high ground in their own merits.

Why even pop media portrayals of so-called Bible characters have gone far from the Charlton Heston portrayal of an almost biblical Moses – the one thing missing in that movie was Moses’ faith in the coming Christ. Now we are given a militant Noah depicted by Russell Crowe -- again without saving faith in the coming Christ which was held by the real Noah. Today’s film Noah has the strength of a “Gladiator,” while all the drama of “Titanic” surrounds him. Such portrayals of human power and

⁴ Psalm 43:1.

might, self-vindication with a tiny bit of help from an unnamed god, are the rule and norm in our worldly culture. Is it any surprise then, when such creeps into our midst?

Self-vindication is a temptation for us. Earlier in this text, fasting during Lent was covered briefly. Some of us voluntarily give up some food, drink, or other pleasure for forty days. We do so recall Christ's giving up everything for us.

To honor that, we individually may have made such a decision to abstain from something. Yet, we must admit we are tempted to either think that we are pleasing God with such work, or hurting Him when we fail to keep our vows. Sometimes we try to rationalize what not abstaining might mean. You might say, "Well, this is a special occasion. I can do this just once and get back to the fasting." Or, you might rationalize, "Fasting is voluntary, it does not gain me any merit before God, so, hey, if I cheat on my word to myself this once, who will know?"

Of course, the answer is that the one who made the vow will know! As will God. So then, when the fast-breaker realizes his or her failure, guilt sets in.

Well, instead of beating yourself up, thank God that your fasting and other bodily preparations can serve to remind you what a sinner you really are! In reflecting on your sin, self-vindication is removed. That is so even if no one else knows (as it should be when you fast, even if you manage to keep it to the end). But, really, each of us may appeal to the logic of self-vindication. Trying to getting justice for oneself is really built into us. Working repentance through that is tough!

That is especially true for all the times when Christians, when you, discover that you cannot vindicate yourself. As you are honest with yourself, you discover that your own ability to clear yourself of blame and even suspicion of blame is not enough. You cannot make yourself right with God, or even really clear your own conscience, can you?

Now we have moved beyond thinking about any simple fast-breaking you may have done. The force of your failure to clear yourself of blame for sin arrives in full when you look at those Holy Ten Words and see just what you are supposed to be and do to stand before God in the Judgment. There, with the meanings unpacked from those words etched in your mind, (or soon to be for the catechumenate), you discover you have no self-defense against breaking even the least part of one of them. That is when the Holy Spirit guides you through God's Word to cry out:

*Vindicate me, O Elohim,
and defend my legal case from (a) people (who are) not pious;
from (a) man of deceit and injustice, deliver me.⁵*

Yes, the prayer for vindication, as indicated earlier, is also appropriate to intone when we are suffering for the Faith. (One can hear the sinless Jesus crying out such words on account of our sins in the Garden of Gethsemane, and silently to the Father in His trials before Pilate and Herod, and with other phrases from the Cross). Even so, for those who are in Christ, those words of the prayer for vindication are

⁵ Psalm 43:1.

given to cause us to realize that we, each one of us, are impious people. You and I, in our old natures inherited from Adam, are the true man of deceit and injustice from whom we each need to be delivered. When we discover that, as Christ did in His suffering and dying, so too can you and I cry out to God for legal defense. (The image of the Hebrew of Psalm 43 is of a courtroom. God is the Judge, and we are the ones in need an Advocate before Him on account of our sinfulness). Upon what are we basing our cries for help? Upon Whom did Jesus rely in His hours of Passion? Our text says:

For you are Elohe, my Means of safety.⁶

For years here, many of you have heard that you are free to call upon God in any time of trouble. You know, because you have heard and believe the Word of God, that God is your God. You confess that He has provided you the vindication you need in the death of Jesus. In Him is true safety, eternal peace with God and our fellow-redeemed. Why then do you, more than you would ever like, feel as the Psalmist declares to God:

*For why have you cast me off?
Why (in) mourning am I caused to go in (the) oppression (of my)
enemy?⁷*

Even the most ardent of the faithful experience such thoughts when faced with injustices on account of the good confession of the Faith. Christians know that they think and feel that way when someone outside them is bringing charges against

⁶ Psalm 43:2a.

⁷ Psalm 43:2.b,c.

them. But, those who are really aware of their innate sinfulness – one of the reasons we have the season of Lent – we who know we are sinners, also know that our consciences often bring charges against us. Such thinking can be very humbling, causing sorrow, and even leading to depression. For times like those we are given the words of this Psalm to cry out:

*Send out Your light and Your truth;
let them cause to lead me,
let them cause to bring me to Your holy Mountain and to Your
dwelling.⁸*

Whether the composer of today's Psalm (the Hellenic Jews thought that was King David) consciously knew it or not, he was asking God in the plural to send the Christ to him through the Means of Grace. Christ Himself is declared to be both "Light," and "Truth." He even testifies to those attributes about Himself, as did others.⁹ Ours, then, is the petition to the God Who answers such prayers to cause to give us the gifts of the Faith. We are asking for mediated grace, because we confess as sinners that we cannot stand for an instant in God's glory without His Help. So, when cry out with such thoughts, God, through His Word and Sacraments, fulfills in us the next lines of the Psalm:

*And I will go to (Your) Altar, O Elohim;
to El my exceeding joy,
and I will cause to praise You in (the) lyre,*

⁸ Psalm 43:3.

⁹ Cf. Luke 1:76—79 and John 14:6, etc.

*O Elohim my Elohe.*¹⁰

In such lines, we who recognize that God in Christ is our Light and Truth, look up from our sins and behold God's Table. From that, we are free to look forward to the ending of Lent and the singing of the "Hallelujahs" which come with visual reminders - the shift to gold and white. We rejoice when the season change occurs. We are moved from hearing readings which emphasize sin and repentance to those which declare forgiveness and joy in the resurrection.

Yet, we are still human. Soon after the Easter proclamations we will find ourselves slipping back into sorrow over those who persecute us. Like the Psalmist, then we will cry:

*Why (are) you cast down, O my soul, and why (are) you murmuring discouragement within me?*¹¹

As the Psalm moves from petition to repentant hope; to confession of sadness; back to petition; then repentant hope; and back to sadness, we are reminded of the Christian's daily struggle. Such words declare to us the emotional and spiritual costs which come as we daily drown our Old Adams that the New Man in Christ may rise up in us. Yet, in the span of salvation, those costs are small compared to the price God paid in sending His Son, Jesus, to die in our sins. That last bit is why our spirits, our souls, our faithful selves need to hear these words of reminder:

¹⁰ Psalm 43:4.

¹¹ Psalm 43:5a.

*Cause to hope in Elohim;
for again I will cause to praise Him,
(the) Help (of) my countenance and my Elohe.¹²*

It is the Word of the Lord that lifts up your downcast face. It is the hope which comes from knowing that Christ has borne our persecutions. Christ will silence all the persecutors of His Church one Day. In the meantime, it is the Word of the Lord's forgiveness that moves you to praise Him. It is the Word of the Lord which shows you that you are truly vindicated in Christ Jesus.

The peace which passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus

Lent V (LSB One-Year Series)

Psalm 43; Genesis 22:1-14; Hebrews 9:11-15; John 8:46-59

April 6, 2014

Paster Michael A. Morehouse

Soli Deo Gloria

¹² Psalm 43:5.

Translation, second draft, Psalm 43

Vindicate me, O Elohim, and defend my cause from (a) people (who are) not pious; from (a) man of deceit and injustice, deliver me.¹³

For you are Elohe my Protection. For why have you cast me off; for why (in) mourning am I caused to go in (the) oppression (of my) enemy?¹⁴

Send out Your light and Your truth; let them cause to lead me, let them cause to bring me to Your holy Mountain and to Your dwelling.¹⁵

And I will go to (Your) Altar, O Elohim; to El exceeding my joy and I will cause to praise You in (the) lyre, O Elohim my Elohe.¹⁶

Why (are) you cast down, O my soul, and why (are) you disquieted within me? Cause to hope to Elohim, for again I will cause to praise Him, my Help (before) my face and my Elohe.¹⁷

Translation, second draft, Psalm 43

*Vindicate me, O Elohim,
and defend my legal case from (a) people (who are) not pious;
from (a) man of deceit and injustice, deliver me.¹⁸*

For you are Elohe, my Means of safety.

For why have you cast me off?

Why (in) mourning am I caused to go in (the) oppression (of my) enemy?¹⁹

Send out Your light and Your truth;

let them cause to lead me,

let them cause to bring me to Your holy Mountain and to Your dwelling.²⁰

*And I will go to (Your) Altar, O Elohim;
to El my exceeding joy,
and I will cause to praise You in (the) lyre,
O Elohim my Elohe.²¹*

Why (are) you cast down, O my soul, and why (are) you murmuring discouragement within me?

Cause to hope in Elohim;

for again I will cause to praise Him,

¹³ Psalm 43:1.

¹⁴ Psalm 43:2.

¹⁵ Psalm 43:3.

¹⁶ Psalm 43:4.

¹⁷ Psalm 43:5.

¹⁸ Psalm 43:1.

¹⁹ Psalm 43:2.

²⁰ Psalm 43:3.

²¹ Psalm 43:4.

*(the) Help (of) my countenance and my Elohe.*²²

²² *Psalm 43:5.*